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**2003 State of Education Speech
Superintendent Linda McCulloch
February 14, 2003**

Good afternoon. I am happy to be here today.

I want to thank President Keenan, Speaker Mood, Senator Tester and Representative Wanzenried for the opportunity to deliver the State of Education address that brings us together to focus on the future of Montana's children.

In addition, I'd like to recognize Governor Martz, and my other colleagues and friends in the Executive and Judicial branches of Montana Government. And welcome to Allison Morrison, who has joined her father, our State Auditor.

Special thank you to my husband Bill for being here – my Valentine for 32 years.

I begin my address today with sincere words of thanks for the thousands of dedicated teachers, administrators, staff and trustees. You work tirelessly helping students learn and prepare for successful lives. Every day, your **INVESTMENT** of time and love makes a difference in the lives of Montana's treasure — our children. Would all educators, staff or trustees in the audience, both in the gallery and on the floor, please stand? Let's give them a hand.

One of those educators is Jay Erdie, Superintendent in Roundup who has been an educator for almost 40 years. I am pleased to announce that Jay will be bringing his experience and expertise to Helena as my new Deputy Superintendent. Jay, my sincere thanks.

Today I greet students, educators and friends of education watching this address **live**. From Westby to Bonner and everywhere in between, OPI's video streaming technology makes this broadcast possible with the simple use of a personal computer.

Today's historic moment with technology is one small example of many changes taking place all around us. A lot has happened since I spoke two years ago. On September 11, 2001, our lives changed forever. We have all taken time since then to re-evaluate our priorities, how precious our families are, and how precious our children are.

In a single moment, educators across the country were called upon to help find answers to their student's grief and fear. Montana's educators rose to the challenge with compassion and dignity. Students wrote letters and poems, raised funds, and organized blood drives.

Fortunately, incidences of violence in Montana are rare. But we are not immune from the safety concerns we, as a nation, face. We are prepared. Crisis response plans are in place to help in the event of a tragedy. Montana's educators' role in healing and keeping communities together in a time of crisis is indispensable. We can't thank them enough.

I know that it can sometimes be difficult to see children through the numbers, charts and graphs. That is why I have invited a special guest to join me today. Let me tell you a little bit about her. She is a fourth grader at Jefferson Elementary School here in Helena. She is studious, an adoring big sister, takes ballet lessons and sells me Girl Scout cookies. And like thousands of other students, she rides a bus to school.

When we have tea together, she keeps me in touch with what is going on in our schools, what we can do better and what we do very well. Today, she represents 150,000 Montana students in K-12. Please join me in welcoming my friend and neighbor, Ellie Tinsley to the Montana Legislature.

Ellie represents our Montana students who rank among the top in the nation. For two years in a row, Montana students scored well above national averages in all grades and subject areas. Montana students in 8th grade nationally rank #1 in Science and #2 in Math. However, I am concerned that our high test scores are leveling. While other states that have significantly **INVESTED** in education are seeing gains in their student scores, our scores aren't improving.

I am incredibly proud of our students. And I'm proud of parents, educators, and communities that support them. To the many communities across Montana who consistently vote to increase tax burdens that maintain quality public schools -- you need to know that our schools are preparing students, like Ellie and Allison, for the future.

I genuinely believe that we all want the same thing for Montana's students.

- We want educated and caring children.
- We want informed, responsible citizens.
- We want our students to achieve their dreams and lead productive lives.
- And perhaps most importantly, we want our kids to believe they can stay, live and work in Montana.

Our commitment to our kids -- and to providing resources to help them succeed -- is about to be truly tested. We face a very real budget crisis. As a former legislator, I understand the difficult decisions that lay ahead. I also know as the State Superintendent and as a long time teacher, decisions made this legislative session will greatly affect our children's future.

There are those who would question our **INVESTMENT** in education. I know:

- When we **INVEST** in education, pre-school through college ... we build a stronger Montana for our children to live, work and raise a family.
- When we **INVEST** in our children's education ... we build Montana's economy.
- When we **INVEST** in public schools ... we create an incentive for businesses to locate in Montana.

We must INVEST in our school kids today.

School budgets are stretched to the breaking point. Montana's school enrollment is declining, because of a decline in birth rates. State support is then reduced due to our current funding formula. If a school loses as few as 8 kids, the school essentially has lost revenue equal to a teacher's salary. But what happens when the classroom teacher is still needed?

The reality is schools must make cuts to balance budgets. While the number of kids goes down, the school's operating budget does not drop in proportion. Many classroom costs, like utilities and building maintenance are fixed and ongoing.

Let me tell you **what cuts to school budgets mean.**

- Classes **will** have more students, and
- Our kids **will** get less personal attention in crucial early grades when kids are learning to read and write
- At-risk kids **will** have fewer opportunities to keep them from dropping out of school.
- Our young people **will** have limited vocational training to prepare them for the work force
- Students **will** have more out-of-date textbooks and library books, and
- Our kids **will** have fewer class offerings: from music to math.

Each school is finding its own solutions. I'm constantly amazed at the sheer will of educators, schools boards, and parents to find creative ways to make ends meet. **We have a responsibility to our children that cannot be ignored.**

As a whole, Montana educators are aging. Many retire; some move out of the state or leave the profession. In addition, Montana schools are not able to compete with the enticing salaries and employment benefits that other states offer our new teacher education graduates. We literally do not have enough new teachers staying in Montana to fill the job openings.

Without qualified teachers to replace them, the high quality education offered by our schools is in **jeopardy**. We need long-term solutions to our shortage of educators.

I am proud of the positive steps the Office of Public Instruction has taken:

- Our website helps teachers find jobs and schools find teachers. More than 1100 job openings are currently posted on our Montana Jobs for Teachers site.

- We are in the final stages of creating an on-line educator license renewal system to eliminate the paper intensive process that exists today.
- And a teacher internship program is in the works so that teachers can more easily master new subject areas.

I am committed to finding solutions to our school funding problems. Working together with the education community, as State Superintendent I proposed a school funding package last April. The package includes:

- ANB averaging to help schools with a declining enrollment
- Student loan repayments, and increased retirement benefits for teachers who teach 30 or more years to help schools recruit and retain highly qualified teachers.
- A per-educator entitlement to create a new way to fund schools without relying on student count.
- Increase in the basic and per ANB entitlements, and
- Increase in special education funding.

This package reflects the full range of challenges facing schools.

I understand school funding increases will not happen without an increase in state revenues. An average week-long tourist **visit** to Montana generates only \$34 in taxes. Our neighbors in Wyoming collect \$122, and Utah \$239 for the same seven day period. I have advocated this session for tourists visiting Montana to pay their fair share for upkeep to our state, through a car rental tax and an increase in the bed tax. **To prevent the decline of our public school system, we must identify long-term revenues that INVEST in education.**

I have the honor of being elected by the people of Montana to make sure our state is providing services their children and grandchildren need. I am responsible for ensuring teachers are qualified, schools are accountable, and funds are distributed to schools, on time, every time, and much much more. I take these responsibilities very seriously.

This past year I visited many Montana schools and communities traveling in a yellow school bus along with members of my staff. I wanted to know how we could better deliver services and resources to Montana schools. Yes, the bus seats are still hard. But the travel is safe and reliable in all weather. The Yellow School Bus Tour was an opportunity to hear firsthand the strengths and challenges facing our public schools.

Here is a snapshot of a small part of what we learned:

- Schools are the heart and soul of Montana communities. They serve as the hub of activity for local sports, arts and community events.
- Pride extends everywhere in our schools and communities. Classrooms are full of students deeply immersed in learning. Parents are ready to lend “helping hands” in the classroom.
- Our educators are community leaders.

- Retired senior citizens are actively volunteering their time and talents to make a difference in children's lives.
- Kids in our small and medium size schools need and deserve the same opportunities as kids in larger cities.
- School and business partnerships are strong. Businesses support school-to-work partnerships, loan their employees to volunteer in schools and frequently provide needed resources and support.
- Montana's economy lays front and center in school concerns. Nearly one quarter of all children in our state are from families living below the poverty level.
- Every school is unique. We were grateful for the opportunity to dine on buffalo stew, learn traditional Indian dancing and drumming and hand games.

The very best way to learn the strengths and challenges of K-12 education is to spend time in your local school. They will be honored to have you visit.

Today is *I love to read day* in Montana. There is no issue closer to my heart than reading and literacy. We know that if a child is not reading at grade level by the end of third grade, it is very difficult for them to catch up. I'm proud that Montana children rank high in the nation for reading, but too many children are still left behind.

In response, I launched a Montana Literacy Initiative. This summer will be our third Literacy Summit to bring together parents, educators, community and business leaders, and higher education to focus on the importance of literacy.

Montana responded to these summits with renewed energy and commitment to improve reading instruction for all our students. **I pledge to continue these efforts!**

We must address the challenges facing American Indian students in Montana. Thanks to Representative Juneau's leadership in research, we can no longer ignore the facts -- Montana's American Indian students drop out of school at a rate more than 3 times that of non-Indian students.

A generation of young men and women are left with little prospect for a future that an education can provide. It is expensive for Montana to support school dropouts. **It is more expensive for our state to lose the potential of our youth.**

I am committed to finding solutions. The Office of Public Instruction competed for and received three federal grants to **invest** in American Indian students.

1. Through a Reading Excellence Act grant, we now fund 30 schools to help them implement successful reading strategies for their students, of which nearly half are American Indian.
2. A federal school drop out grant is funding six school districts in Box Elder, Browning, Heart Butte, Lame Deer, Poplar and Rocky Boy to identify community strategies that will help their youth stay in school. We are also developing a statewide drop out plan.

3. We know that students drop out of school for many reasons. A character education grant helps schools create a positive, respectful school setting that promotes kids staying in school.

All Montana students deserve the opportunity to understand the rich American Indian culture and history in Montana. I commend Representative Norma Bixby for her dedication to obtain funds so all Montana students and schools can understand the culture and heritage of Montana's Indian people. Without financial support, **our Constitutional promise of "Indian Education for All" will remain only a paper promise.**

One year ago, President Bush signed into law his No Child Left Behind Act. This federal law places a high priority on education and a commitment to educate all children. But it comes with extensive and expensive accountability and state and local responsibilities. These have created new challenges, especially to rural states. The good news is this new federal law brings resources for Montana's K-12 public education system. BUT these resources come with many requirements. For example, this federal law requires much more testing of our students than is currently required by our Montana Board of Public Education. Student assessment decisions should be left to individual states.

When student test scores do not improve enough, President Bush's No Child Left Behind law requires the state to take actions regarding a school's curriculum and staffing. This greatly concerns me, as it does local school trustees. While being accountable is a good thing, we have always believed that decisions should be made at the local level. **Those beliefs have served us well.**

These are just a couple of my concerns. We will need to work together throughout the coming years to make this new federal law beneficial to **all** of Montana's students.

In the past 50 years science and technology has radically changed our lifestyle and economy. It used to be simple to look under the hood of your car to figure out what was wrong. Not any more. Today's specialized diagnostic equipment is essential to root out computer-based engine solutions. Gone is the day that all you needed was a toolbox with a couple of wrenches. Since 1950, the demand for skilled labor has more than tripled. Businesses now expect a workforce to have a set of skills that were unimaginable even 30 years ago. Think about it, teachers prepare students for career options that do not even exist today.

Education will prepare our children and grandchildren for this new century. Education allows them to compete in a world where all sectors of the economy – from microchips to mining – depend on high tech skills and training.

Education is the engine that drives economic development. Businesses will absolutely not locate in Montana if we do not provide a well-educated workforce, and a place where they will

want their own children to go to school. **Education is the key to moving Montana's economy forward.**

I have great faith in the collective commitment of Montana's parents, educators, school staff, school boards, senior citizens, business partners and community members. **Together we WILL INVEST in building a bright future for our children.**

We Montanans can do whatever we put our minds to. Let me tell you about a very special senior citizen who didn't let anything stop him from making his dreams a reality.

This gentleman, a retired Bonner millworker, began volunteering many years ago at the local elementary school. The students already knew him as his barbecue grill fed many hamburgers for years to the neighborhood kids. He helped students, kindergarten through 8th grade, with their reading skills and learning to use the computer. After a number of years, the 8th grade class asked him to be their graduation speaker. He said he couldn't possibly speak in front of all those people. Yet, it nagged at him -- he had encouraged the kids to reach for high goals. To be a better role model, eventually he agreed to be the speaker. It was the best graduation speech I've ever heard.

Later we learned that he had dropped out of college in 1948, during a required speech class. And he often thought about not finishing his education. So, 50 years after dropping out of college, he enrolled in a speech class and returned to the University of Montana. He passed, took more classes, and then he enrolled in the teacher education program.

Today, at 75 years young, he is finishing up his last classes and will do his student teaching next school year. Help me welcome an inspiration to education, my friend Mr. Arnold "ODE" Odegard. Please stand up and be recognized, Ode ☐

Ode is an example of an amazing talent pool Montana has in its school volunteers, our educators and our emerging new teachers. Without a doubt, "Ode" deserves our deep appreciation for his INVESTMENT in Montana's children. Just seeing both Ellie and Ode side by side reminds me what Montana is really all about, **generations working together for a better future for our children.**

I'd like to thank the kids watching this on the Internet. Knowing you are out there helped me focus my thoughts and keep my priorities straight. Perhaps, that is what Montanans can ask of all of us over the remainder of this session. To remember our children are listening to the priorities we set. **The decisions we make will shape their lives.**

Today's students will become tomorrow's business, spiritual, community and school leaders. They will also become Montana's Legislators, Governors, judges and State Superintendents.

Montana students are our greatest treasure; when we INVEST in them, there is no telling where they can take this state.

On behalf of Montana's 150,000 school children and all who work on behalf of public education in our state, I thank you for your time today and your interest in Montana's public schools. My door is always open and I look forward to your visit.